



“Let There Be Lent”

Herald March
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He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

—Matthew 4:2 NRSV

Since the fourth century, Christians have observed Lent as a period of reflection and repentance in preparation for Easter. The forty days before Easter have been a time of fasting in imitation of Jesus' fast and trial in the wilderness.

Lenten seasons, as evangelist and former Graceland professor Velma Ruch has noted, often come unbidden into our lives. Circumstances force us into spiritual deserts not of our own choosing. So why would Christians deliberately create a little desert in the forty days before Easter? Perhaps because experience teaches us that only when we have cleared away the clutter will our eyes, ears, and hearts be open for God.

The purpose of Lent is to focus with new intensity on Christ and to make room within for God's redemptive and creative power. Giving up something intentionally can create more space for Christ in our lives, both symbolically and concretely. In Lent, we discover, in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, what our “pacifiers are....(those things) we use to fill the

empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone” (*Christian Century* 115, February 18, 1998, 169.) Choosing to forsake whatever blinds us to realities about ourselves or dissuades us of our need for God is the first step. Lent is not just about going without; it is also about making space for the divine Will in our lives. The point is to discover where we hunger and to invite God to fill that famished place.

“After a great deal of thought, I have decided to give up liver and rhubarb for Lent.” It is tempting to find an easy way through Lent, but a few years ago, our Bible study group read Brown Taylor's article (cited above). After some introspection about our personal pacifiers, we gave Lent a chance. The impact has lasted beyond the forty days. We discovered things about ourselves that are not easy to forget. One person revealed that his overconsumption of pop in times of stress was an attempt to find comfort in the bubbles rather than admitting his need for God's help. Another realized television had become a way to escape the silence God inhabits. One or two even gave up chocolate when they realized they were trying to fill an emptiness it could not satisfy.

Lent can also impact the health of our congregations. It can be a useful time to consider how our interactions with each other affect the whole body. What unfruitful or harmful behaviors might we fast from in the interest of Christ's community? Gossiping, taking sides, judging, resisting reconciliation, inciting anger or hopelessness, refusing to forgive, undermining others, self-righteousness... In the list of attitudes that weaken a church, where do we see ourselves? There are old bags of garbage lying around—in our lives

and in our congregations—that we have gotten used to stumbling over or just avoiding. We have forgotten that these are exactly the situations God's healing power was intended for. Lent calls us to an honest look at old patterns and hurts, and invites us to let go of them. The vacated space then becomes God's new garden plot.

Lent is about self-examination, confession, correction, forgiveness. We enter the desert intentionally, in imitation of Christ, to face our own demons, to confront and name the powers that subtly hold us captive, diminish our personhood, and deplete our discipleship.

“Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return” are the words spoken on Ash Wednesday as Christians' foreheads are marked with ashes. These words declare our mortality. They recall the creaturely boundaries we are ever tempted to transgress because of the secret illusions we harbor of our own divinity. Lent calls us back to the rock-hard reality of our existence: we are dust, beings marked by our estrangement from the true Source of Life, in need of God's own crucified love.

Lent helps us see our tendencies, our dependencies, our failures, and weaknesses with new clarity. This clearer vision of who we really are prepares us to grasp anew the astounding gift God offers us in the cross, burial, and empty tomb of Christ. Lent is not about earning grace; it is about living grace.

Not long ago we moved. That meant cleaning and sorting, and somehow, when we were all done, we felt a bit lighter. We need not think of Lent as a time of gloomy self-denial. Lent is ultimately about lightening our load for the journey with Jesus.

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